

# *Welcome to our History*

## **Activity Report**

**Manon Tremblay  
Centre for Native Education  
April 1997**

## **Background**

The Centre for Native Education was founded in 1992 to address the needs of the growing population of Native students at Concordia University. In addition to offering support services to these students, the Centre also seeks to bring awareness of Native issues and increase the knowledge of Native cultures among the Concordia community. To achieve this, the Centre regularly hosts workshops, lectures and other activities on a wide variety of subjects.

As part of its awareness mandate, the Centre for Native Education organized a cultural day, *Welcome to our History*, which was held on the Mezzanine of the Hall building on March 12, 1997. The exhibit took the form of a historical timeline from prehistory to the present day and explored different facets of Native history.

## **WELCOME TO OUR HISTORY**

The Centre for Native Education applied for and received a grant from the Aboriginal Workforce Association of Montreal to help with the human resources needed to plan and organize the cultural day. The Centre asked for \$11 050 and received \$8 787. This allowed the Centre to hire three students on a part-time basis for 10 weeks. Consequently, the Centre hired Laverne Gervais, an Ojibwa student majoring in linguistics; Catherine Mattes, a Metis completing her first year in the Master of Fine Arts programme; and Steve Robinson, a Giktsa'an majoring in sociology. Rena Martin, the Centre for Native Education's student assistant, also worked on this project.

The three students hired to work on the exhibit were chosen for their interest in the project, their need for experience in a field related to their studies and of course their financial situation. As project assistants reporting to the Centre for Native Education's Coordinator, the three students were encouraged to express their ideas and come up with creative ways of getting their message across in the exhibit. The Coordinator and the students each chose a number of topics and issues which they were particularly interested in, did the necessary research, established contacts and set up their respective parts of the exhibit.

All the students expressed their pleasure at working on this project. They were also very grateful for the opportunity to learn about their own history. Planning the exhibit provided them with a hands-on way of doing this. As a team, the students got along very well and learned to work together. They listened to each others ideas and were able to give constructive criticism. One student mentioned that there was such a good working relationship between all the people involved and the atmosphere of the Centre is so relaxed that at times it was hard to concentrate on work!!

From the very beginning of the project, the three students were given a very free reign with the understanding that all ideas and concepts had to be approved by the Coordinator before implementation. This arrangement became crucial to the Coordinator as her other duties at the time prevented her from spending much time on the exhibit. Some of the students felt this absence. They would have liked more feedback from the Coordinator and interpreted the situation as a hesitancy on her part to criticize. In truth, the only criticism that the Coordinator gave (and felt was needed as the students were doing an excellent job) was that they tended to spend too much time on research and not enough on setting up the actual exhibit. This led to a lot of last minute running around. The students were quick to point out however that they found the Coordinator was patient, flexible and very approachable.

In the future, the Coordinator will need to spend more time supervising and learn to give feedback more often.

In retrospect, the Coordinator realized that some of the students had bit off more than they could chew in the subjects that they had chosen. Their enthusiasm for the project contributed in some way to this. Weekly meetings had originally been planned to share information, discuss ideas and keep everyone focused on their work. Unfortunately, these meetings turned out to be difficult to schedule because of the different agendas of everyone involved.

Because of their limited work experience, two of the students have not acquired the self-confidence needed to appraise their work fairly. This was apparent from their personal reports where they voice stress and anxiety about unfulfilled potential, and apprehensions of a job not well done. As the students all did very commendable work, there is an obvious need for them to work on their confidence and with more feedback, to learn to appreciate the work that they are doing.

In their reports, all students mentioned that working on this event has given them the opportunity to learn new job skills. Even in so short a time as 12 weeks, a definite progression could be seen in each individual's planning, organization and communication skills.

The exhibit went off very well. As expected in events such as these, we encountered technical problems which could not be accounted for. First, the Audio-Visual Department failed to deliver the equipment reserved for the day. Then, when the equipment finally arrived, the promised technician did not show up. After repeated trips to the Audio-Visual Department, someone came down and plugged in all the equipment - and left without verifying whether everything was in good working order. Sure enough, the slide projector was in disrepair. Another trip to the Audio-Visual Department and a new projector was brought down. Also, Physical Resources were to supply us with a predetermined number of tables, chairs, panels and easels. These were delivered but in the wrong numbers! Too many chairs and tables, not enough panels and no easels! Last but not least, a number of tablecloths were booked through Conference Services who were supposed to bring them down around 8:30. Still waiting at 9:00, someone was dispatched to the Conference Services office to find out what had become of the tablecloths. Apparently, they had been delivered! After some searching on the part of Conference Services, the tablecloths were finally found on the 7th floor... As for lunch, the pizza was delivered as promised but there was no sign of the water bottles that were ordered. One more trip to Conference Services cleared up the mistake and it was smooth sailing from then on.

Everyone involved in setting up the exhibit felt that the security guards were disruptive and intervened needlessly. Indeed they seemed to regard any activity on the Mezzanine as highly suspicious and the setting up of the wigwam proved to be more than they could handle judging from the amount of gaping that it incited. One security guard was constantly telling the exhibit participants to lower the volume on the sound system. As the music was not exceedingly loud, and other events on the Mezzanine have featured much louder music (not mentioning the Mezz Café), the participants were understandably annoyed at this constant admonition.

All problems aside, the exhibit exceeded by far our highest expectations. The star attraction was undoubtedly Whitehorse, a Native man portraying an 18th century Odawa complete with wigwam filled with every single daily object one could find in such a dwelling at that period of time. Other parts of the exhibit which received a lot of positive feedback were the contemporary art and the social problems section. Once the exhibit was set up, it was

much easier to see what was lacking and what could be done better if the activity is to be repeated in the future. For example, it was felt by some that although colonization was well depicted, it was lacking in interpretation. Also, the artists invited to demonstrate their arts and crafts did not deliver what was promised. Due to circumstances beyond everyone's control, the basketmaker could not make it (because of a broken shoulder); a drum maker canceled at the last minute and a wampum belt maker had a date in court. One of the invited artists was supposed to demonstrate the art of making wooden masks. Instead, she brought a couple of drums and spent the day distributing information on Native spirituality. Although this is certainly not what we expected, it nonetheless proved to be highly popular with visitors. In the future, it might help to set conditions of employment down in writing.

One aspect that was missing from the exhibit was Native food. Although, this had originally been planned, lack of time prevented carrying it through. One student mentioned that Native games and sports might be something to think about in a future exhibit. Another suggested Native poets and writers. In short, there is room for improvement.

The amount of interest generated by the exhibit was phenomenal. All exhibit participants were prepared to encounter some amount of racist behavior and ignorant comments. The response however was overwhelmingly positive. The most common remark was that the Centre for Native Education should do this more often and for more than one day!! The sheer number of people who took the time to visit the displays was astounding. Nonetheless, everyone involved was disappointed in the lack of Native visitors... In organizing the event, the Coordinator and the student assistants felt that they were taking a chance by setting up on the Mezzanine as this is obviously an overused medium of disseminating information. In the planning stage, frequent trips were made to the Mezzanine to see what other organizations were doing. Everyone was struck by the lack of attention other displays were getting and expressed their fear at working so hard for naught. This however turned out to be unfounded as people came in droves. Part of the success of the exhibit undoubtedly rests with all the Native students who took time to volunteer their services and who represented their people and culture very well. Everyone involved showed great potential, fielded questions in an appropriate manner and provided valuable information.

Much more could be said about this experience and much more could undoubtedly be done in future events. However, the important thing is that the exhibit made a deep impression on everyone who participated and everyone who took the time to visit. The exhibit was a tremendous success.